generator wall can be avoided. Other potential problems include plasma instabilities in the ionized gas arising from interactions between the flow and the magnetic field; corrosion of the generator walls or of the air heater by coal ash may also present difficulties.

Several generator designs have been proposed, but not yet tested, to overcome these problems. In the Avco design, coal ash will be deliberately allowed to condense on the generator walls, building up a protective layer that R. T. Rosa of Avco believes will keep seed material from shorting the electrodes. Research groups at the University of Tennessee Space Institute in Tullahoma, Tennessee, at Stanford University in California, and at the Westinghouse research laboratories in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, have proposed still other designs. For example, the Westinghouse team, headed by Stuart Way, prefer a design with hotter wall temperatures that will prevent ash buildup; Way believes that cleaner fuels than coal—such as char, which is produced as a byproduct in coal gasification plants—may ultimately be preferable for MHD. But there appears to be general agreement that the problems can be solved, and that long-term testing and further experience with a pilot plant will be necessary to arrive at the best design.

Perhaps the most promising aspect of MHD power generation is the potential environmental advantages of these plants over traditional coal burning plants. Experimental work directed by Daniel Bienstock at the U.S. Bureau of Mines laboratory in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has confirmed that the seed particles react with sulfur to form potassium sulfate or similar compounds which are relatively easy to precipitate (*1*). Because the alkali particles are recovered from the exhaust gases by cloth traps or electrostatic precipitators —indeed, must be recovered and recycled for economic reasons—essentially all the sulfur can be removed from even high-sulfur coals.

Nitrogen oxide emissions, which at one time were expected to be a problem because of the high temperatures in MHD plants, can also be reduced, Bienstock finds, if the coal is burned in a fuel-rich mixture and excess air is added further downstream. Work at Avco and in Japan has confirmed the Bureau of Mines results. Detailed calculations at Avco of the kinetics of the nitrogen oxide production and consumption indicate that the temperature and composition of the combustion gases can be controlled to reduce NO_x concentrations to acceptable levels.

If the predicted efficiencies can be achieved, and several independent analyses of the potential of MHD indicate that they can be (*2*), thermal pollution resulting from discharge of waste heat into cooling water would be reduced substantially, and would be less than that arising from any existing power plant. If gas turbines were used as the second half of an MHD power plant, the steam cycle and the need for cooling water could be eliminated.

Reliable estimates of the cost of MHD plants are not yet available, although there appears to be general agreement that construction costs should be approximately the same as those for traditional coal-fired plants and that, because of the more efficient use of fuel, operating costs per kilowatt would be significantly lower. The cost of the magnets is the largest single item, and the air preheaters are also expected to be expensive. Hence reductions in the cost of superconducting magnets or the cost of oxygen, which by enriching the fuel mixture would reduce the preliminary heating and hence the cost of the equipment, could further improve the prospects for this source of power. Developing the technology will be neither cheap nor without some financial risk, so that in the absence of substantial federal funding—which has not been forthcoming; current R&D spending is at the rate of about $3 million per year—only limited progress can be made. Both demonstration and commercial power plants will probably have to be large, because the power output of an MHD generator increases in proportion to its volume, while most of the losses increase in proportion to its surface area; 100 Mw is estimated to be the smallest size feasible for a plant that does not use oxygen enrichment.

The use of coal or fuels derived from coal to generate electricity carries with it the high cost to the environment and to human health that is associated with the mining of coal. But this energy source will not be replaced overnight; indeed the production of coal is expected to increase in coming years, so that efforts to improve the use of this fuel would seem well worthwhile. MHD generating plants would, at the very least, diminish the impact of mining by producing equivalent amounts of power with less fuel. What appears to be needed, as one proponent put it, is to "give MHD a chance."

—ALLEN L. HAMMOND

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Speaking of Science

Frog Shortage Possible This Winter

The acute shortage of gravid (egg-bearing) female *Rana pipiens* that occurred last winter will probably be repeated this year, according to Frank Nace, director of the University of Michigan Amphibian Facility at Ann Arbor.

Large numbers of frogs died during hibernation last winter, primarily from septicemia. The total number of dead is unknown, but three major dealers in the western United States, for example, lost more than 90 percent of their stock. Normally, some 15 to 20 million frogs are used each year for research and educational purposes.

Although the cause of last winter's epidemic is not definitely known, Nace suggests that an unusually large spawning in the spring of 1971 and a drought that summer depleted the frogs' food supply. Most of the frogs thus went into hibernation in a state of semistarvation and were particularly susceptible to bacterial infection.

Preliminary indications from the fall migration collections now in progress suggest that a high mortality rate can be expected again this year. Although the shortage will probably be less severe, he adds, "investigators who need gravid animals should order their winter supplies immediately." At least one major dealer contests this view, however, arguing both that enough frogs will be available and that dealers are better able to maintain them during hibernation.—T.H.M.